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ABSTRACT

The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System at the University of Iowa collects and disseminates curriculum materials and information and offers inservice workshops to vocational educators. A third-party evaluation of the system was made through a 3-day site visit by three experts who interviewed personnel from the system, administrators and faculty from the College of Education, the system's advisory council, and the Iowa Department of Education. Open-ended, semistructured interviews focused on three lines of inquiry: current operations of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System, the context and network of program improvements for career education, and how planning and evaluation practices influence the operations of the system. Eleven major findings were reported, leading to the following six conclusions: (1) the system is a viable and successful project that should be continued; (2) the roles and relationships of the system to other components of the statewide curriculum improvement effort should be better defined; (3) formal mechanisms for policy setting, planning, evaluation, and redirection of the system should be established; (4) the role and functioning of the system should be reexamined; (5) the system could make better use of available cataloging and recordkeeping technologies; and (6) the time and efforts of the system's staff should be leveraged so services can be expanded without overtaxing staff. Recommendations included establishing a policy-advisory group for the system, formulating guidelines for operation, setting goals and objectives, increasing the use of state partnerships, and expanding the service to the private sector. (KC)

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A THIRD-PARTY EVALUATION OF THE IOWA CURRICULUM ASSISTANCE SYSTEM

Harold Starr

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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FOREWORD

The Iowa Department of Education Bureau of Career Education, requested the National Center for Research in Vocational Education to conduct an evaluation of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System. The major purpose for the evaluation was to recommend ways to improve this already successful system.

The National Center's project staff consisted of Harold Starr, Senior Research Specialist who served as project director and author of this report; Jay Smink, Senior Research Specialist; and Carol Laughlin, Director of the Massachusetts Vocational Curriculum Resource Center. The project was carried out in the Evaluation and Policy Division of the National Center which is directed by N. L. McCaslin, Associate Director.

Critiques of a draft of this report were provided internally by Jay Smink, Senior Research Specialist; Wes Budke, Senior Research Specialist; and N. L. McCaslin, Associate Director.

On behalf of the National Center, I am happy to acknowledge and express our appreciation to all those who contributed to this report.

Ray D. Ryan
Executive Director
The National Center for Research
in Vocational Education

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Iowa State Department of Education, Bureau of Career Education requested the National Center for Research in Vocational Education to conduct a third-party evaluation of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is a project of the Bureau of Career Education that is currently housed in and operated by the College of Education, the Iowa State University.

The Bureau of Career Education engages in a planned and programmatically organized program improvement initiative that is periodically redirected to meet both new and continuing career education needs. The effectiveness and efficiency of the Bureau of Career Education's program improvement initiatives at any point in time require that all component parts and projects form a coherent and internally supportive system of program improvement.

The Bureau of Career Education requested the evaluation in order to secure information and recommendations for improving the current effectiveness of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and to ensure that its goals, objectives, and activities will be as compatible as possible with the Bureau of Career Education's statewide curriculum improvement initiatives for the period 1987-1992.

The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System began operations in 1982 as a three-year project of the Bureau of Career Education. The current director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System was appointed at that time. The director is assisted by a staff that currently includes two full-time employees--a secretary and a person responsible for curriculum searches, loans, and purchases, and a 1/2 time person to assist with searches and loans. Part-time student helpers are also employed but not on a continuing basis.

The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff initially collected and disseminated curriculum materials and information. Then in 1983, the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System expanded its operations by offering inservice workshops to local level vocational educators and others.

The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is a member of the National Network of Curriculum Coordination for Vocational Technical Education (NNCCVTE) and its Midwest Curriculum Coordination Center (MCCC) as well as the Mid-America Vocational Curriculum Consortium (MAVCC). In

addition to its involvement with these organizations, the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System receives advice for improving and extending its services from the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council.

In 1985, the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff conducted a survey of users and their supervisors to assess satisfaction with system services. The results of this survey led the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff to conclude that both Iowa Curriculum Assistance System users and their supervisors are generally satisfied with the services they receive. The current third-party evaluation was intended to complement this survey as well as to go beyond the survey by concerning itself with the role of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System for the time frame 1987 to 1992.

Evaluation Approach

An agenda for the third-party evaluation was prepared by the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System in consultation with staff of the Bureau of Career Education and the evaluation team. The latter included two National Center staff persons and an out-of-state consultant who directs a curriculum center very much like that of Iowa Curriculum Assistance System.

It was agreed that the evaluation team should visit with the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director and his staff in Ames on the morning of the first day of the site visit and with administrators and faculty from the College of Education during that afternoon. Several of the persons who were interviewed on that day also serve on the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council. On the second day of the site visit, the evaluation team conducted interviews in Des Moines with staff from the Iowa Department of Education as well as members of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council. On the third day of the site visit, additional persons from the Iowa Department of Education were interviewed and exit interviews were conducted.

The primary vehicle used by project staff to gather evidence about the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System was the use of open-ended, semi-structured interviews with persons selected by the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and the director of the Bureau of Career Education. The interview process was designed to elicit common as well as unique concerns and understandings of interviewees about the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System.

Prior to the site visit, the Bureau of Career Education requested that the evaluation should be focused around 14 specific questions pertaining to the functioning of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System. However, with agreement from the director of the Bureau of Career Education, the evaluation of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System proceeded instead along three broad lines of inquiry with the 14 specific concerns being kept in mind by the evaluation team.

The three lines of inquiry included: (1) current operations of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System including its office practices, its relationships to its subscribers and other curriculum efforts funded by the Bureau of Career Education, and its relationships with other curriculum centers within and outside of the state; (2) the context and network of program improvements for career education and the likely impact of this context and network on the mission, objectives, and activities of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System for the period 1987-1992; and (3) how planning and evaluation practices influence the operations of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System as well as the effectiveness of these practices in supporting the Bureau of Career Education's present and planned statewide curriculum improvement initiatives.

Documents describing the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and its activities were supplied to the project director prior to the site visit. Additional documents were made available to the team after their arrival in Iowa by staff of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and the Bureau of Career Education. These documents served as an additional source of information for understanding the operations and effectiveness of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System.

Contents of the Report

This report contains two chapters in addition to the present one. Chapter 2 contains the findings and conclusions of the evaluation. Chapter 3 contains recommendations that are presented for consideration by the leadership of the Bureau of Career Education and the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System. The intent of the recommendations are to strengthen the viability and productiveness of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System during the period 1987-1992.

CHAPTER 2

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter describes the findings and conclusions of the third-party evaluation. First, major findings are presented about (1) current operations of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System, (2) the place of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System in the context and network of program improvements for career education for the period 1987-1992, and (3) the planning and evaluation processes used by the staffs of Iowa Curriculum Assistance System. The findings are followed by a set of conclusions derived from the findings.

Findings

Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Operations

The findings of the third-party evaluation team with respect to the operations of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System are as follows:

> Finding 1. Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff have a strong and visible service orientation and they exhibit a keen interest in meeting client needs.

The staff seemed quite proud of the growing interest and acceptability of their services by Iowa educators and business and industry clients. Evidence of this interest can be found in the growing number of requests for curriculum searches and workshops as well as the enthusiasm exhibited by Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff persons when describing their roles in the project.

> Finding 2. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System provides a very rapid turnaround time in responding to clients requests for services. System users are appreciative of the quality of the services received from the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and its staff.

Interviewees who were asked to report on the progress of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System over the last four years were in agreement that this project has had a positive

impact on vocational education in the state. A few interviewees indicated that they had heard of a few isolated instances of dissatisfaction with the services of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System; however, these few instances were described as having occurred during the first few years of the system's existence.

> Finding 3. There is a very creative use of the limited space available to the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff.

The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is located in a basement of a university building. There is an obvious lack of privacy for its staff. In addition, there are inconveniences and difficulties associated with storing Iowa Curriculum Assistance System products as well as moving large numbers of documents (e.g., products disseminated for the Career Information System of Iowa) to the first floor and loading them for delivery. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff seem to cope very well with limitations in space.

> Finding 4. The director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System has formulated and implemented a number of creative ideas for creating interest in and expanding the use of the services of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System.

The director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System conducts approximately 12 inservice workshops each year. Many interviewees expressed the belief that there is strong interest in the field in having more curriculum workshops--and especially workshops that are directed to vocational education service area interests. The director and his staff meet regularly with teacher education classes to inform them about the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and how class members may avail themselves of system services while in school and when they become employed as teachers or administrators. The director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System has produced a number of well-designed and attractive brochures and other informative publications describing the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and the availability of its services.

Finding 5. There is an absence of either a manual or a computerized system for cataloging Iowa Curriculum Assistance System documents and office procedures with respect to searches, loans, and purchases of products seem overly labor intensive.

The evaluation team was informed by the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System that plans are in progress to catalogue the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System collection. However, as best as the team could determine, there are no plans as yet to involve a professional librarian in the planning of the cataloging system or to involve a consultant familiar with the cataloging of curriculum center documents. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System support staff seemed basically untroubled with this state of affairs. The same cannot be said for the members of the evaluation team and for at least three reasons: curriculum searches, inventorying and preparing orders for materials and services, inventorying loaned materials, and determining when these materials should be recalled are done manually and are highly labor intensive activities; accountability data are not easily retrievable; and while expressing the belief that they are not overburdened with present work loads, the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System support staff indicated that additional assistance, at least in the form of student help, would be very welcome.

Finding 6. The curriculum/instructional materials search process by the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff does not always seem to fully utilize all of the databases that are available for that purpose.

This finding is a judgement one. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director believes that the current range of search sources and methods are appropriate and sufficient. Team members suggest that an improved inhouse capacity to search other databases (e.g., VECM, INFORM) would enhance the completeness and accuracy of the search process.

Finding 7. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director continues to try and have the the system become self-supporting. However, this goal may be both counterproductive and unrealistic.

The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System has raised substantial funds from sales of curriculum products and from serving as the primary distributer of products developed by the Career Information System of Iowa. However, there did not appear to be any evidence presented or which could be inferred from documents or interviews that would lead the evaluation team to conclude that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System could or should become fully self-supporting.

Although the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System has been increasingly effective in raising funds to support the system, some interviewees pointed out that attempting to be fully self-supporting has some drawbacks. For example, several individuals mentioned that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System prefers (and sometimes noticeably so) that buyers of curriculum materials make their purchases through the system rather than go directly to a supplier (which in this case is usually another curriculum center). When acting as an intermediary, the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is able to tack on an extra cost for such things as three-ring binders that promote the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System, postage, and the like. The perception of some interviewees seems to be that at best these practices are annoying and at worst unfair. The evaluation team also wonders whether the drive to be fully self-supporting may not have the potential for ultimately placing the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director in the position of having to choose between activities and service strategies which bring in revenue and those that do not, even if the former situation is less mission-specific.

The Role of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System in the Program Improvement System of the Bureau of Career Education

> Finding 8. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director has been unusually successful in establishing a viable and growing career education curriculum assistance service to Iowa educators. However, it is probably fair to say that if the director is any more successful he will "drown" in his success.

There are at least seven major kinds of evidence that support this finding that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System has been exceedingly successful:

- The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is effective in collecting products from other curriculum sources from within and outside of the state.

- The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is effective in creating interest in and providing awareness of competency-based curriculum and especially through well-attended workshops which users value highly.

- The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is viewed by most staff from the Bureau of Career Education as a useful and understandable service.

- The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is viewed by most of the Iowa State University staff who were interviewed as a service that is beneficial to teacher education programs with particular usefulness for graduate methods courses.

- The successes of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System are highly related to a broad knowledge base which its director possesses as well as the very positive working relationships he has with many different client groups.

Under present conditions of operation and staffing, the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System cannot provide a substantial increase in service to clients. However, there is every reason to assume that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System will receive increasing demands for its services from the field. Either the current operation will have to work "smarter" or new service strategies will have to be formulated and implemented if present levels of user satisfaction are to be maintained or improved.

> Finding 9. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is part of an overall program improvement plan of the Bureau of Career Education. It is expected to be a major part of an overall state system of curriculum improvement. It is moving in this direction but still retains the characteristics of an independently operating project or center that remains somewhat as an "island" in a state system of career education curriculum efforts.

The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is viewed by the Bureau of Career Education as a major and vital link in its statewide curriculum program improvement efforts. However, many interviewees perceive the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System more as an independent center than as an integral part of a statewide curriculum assistance system. An

excellent case can be made for locating the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System outside of the Bureau of Career Education. However, having the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System operated under contract rather than directly by the Bureau of Career Education adds to the difficulty of ensuring that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is part of the larger system of statewide curriculum assistance.

The evaluation team notes that the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System makes a concerted effort to work with all groups in the state concerned with career education curriculum and that he is well respected by his peers in this regard. However, the evaluation team was not clear about how the Bureau of Career Education or the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director ensures in a systematic way that the services of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System are coordinated or articulated with the many other career education curriculum efforts operating within the state.

Planning and Redirection for the Period 1987-1992

> Finding 10. There appears to be significant "soft spots" in the process of policy setting for the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and in the annual and long-range planning for its operations.

Two entities influence policy for the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System: the Bureau of Career Education and the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council. The Iowa State University College of Education which is responsible for performance of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System contract has only an indirect interest in the policy's for the system.

A review of the planning and evaluation practices of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and accompanying documentation as well as interviews with college, Bureau of Career Education, and advisory council leadership strongly suggest that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director is faced with "too many bosses" when it comes to meeting policy expectations. The term policy expectations is used because the advisory council should not be in the position of setting or inferring policy (although this may have occurred at times) and the Bureau of Career Education has no formal mechanism in place to routinely set, evaluate, and redirect policies with regard to the operations, planning,

or redirection and reconceptualization of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System.

As a result, it seems that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director proceeds using whatever policy signals he believes exist. In addition, the evaluation team was left with the impression that there seems to be an obvious gap between the functioning of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System as a curriculum center and the Bureau of Career Education's desire to see it function in a planned way as an important but integral component of the Bureau of Career Education's network of statewide curriculum improvement initiatives. In this context, evaluation of Iowa Curriculum Assistance System activities has focused on producing information that is used to improve present operations rather than focusing on information needed to determine new directions or the need for a reconceptualization of mission, goals, and objectives.

The evaluation team was asked to review the programmatic objectives and activities of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System in relation to its mission. The team was concerned first by what seemed like a lack of clearly defined goals and objectives for the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System for the next several years. The evaluation team was further troubled by the fact that Iowa Curriculum Assistance System documentation lists more than 60 separate activities (of different levels of importance and complexity) which the director believes should be carried out over the next several years in the absence of (1) written or orally presented evidence of clear relationships to programmatic goals and objectives of the Bureau of Career Education or of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System, or (2) the costs associated with either clusters or individual activities. Lastly, the evaluation team wondered whether it would be more desirable to have the responsibility for setting programmatic goals, objectives, and activities reside solely with the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System or whether these tasks should be shared between the Bureau of Career Education and the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System.

> Finding 11. The role and functioning of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council is not entirely clear either to members of the council or to the evaluation team.

It was agreed by interviewees who were members of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance Advisory Council that the

council's role is only an advisory one. Nevertheless, an impression was gained from comments made by these persons that there may be times when council interactions with the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System go beyond giving advise about operations to giving advise about policy. The evaluation team also received conflicting information from these interviewees about how advisory council members are appointed. Some interviewees stated that they were unaware of the process by which advisory council members are terminated. The council usually meets only twice a year. On the basis of comments that were obtained from the members who were interviewed, it would seem that there is a lack of continuity with respect to following up on council recommendations or to the council's agenda.

Conclusions

Six major conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the evaluation of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System:

- The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System is a viable and successful project of the Bureau of Career Education. The evaluation team believes that there is no question that the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System should continue to be supported. It is a vital link in the Bureau of Career Education's statewide system of career education curriculum improvement.

- The leadership of the Bureau of Career Education needs to better define the roles and relationships of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System to other components of its statewide curriculum improvement effort.

- Formal mechanisms for policy-setting, planning, evaluation, and redirection of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System need to be established or strengthened.

- There is a need for the Bureau of Career Education to reexamine the role and functioning of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council.

- The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System operates less efficiently than it might because it does not take full advantage of available cataloging and record keeping technologies.

- There is a need to leverage the time and efforts of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff and especially its director so that services can be expanded without overtaxing staff.

CHAPTER 3

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations to improve the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System for the period 1987-1992 are offered to the leadership of the Iowa State Department of Education, Bureau of Career Education and the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System.

Recommendations To the Bureau of Career Education:

- Establish an Iowa Curriculum Assistance System policy-advisory group that reports to the director of the Bureau of Career Education. The Bureau of Career Education may want to explore the tradeoffs resulting from appointing only Bureau of Career Education staff to such a group or utilizing the services of others including representatives from the College of Education of the Iowa State University and other state universities, one or more curriculum improvement cadres, the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council, and other concerned and affected constituencies and groups. The ultimate responsibility for policy-setting resides, of course, within the Iowa Department of Education.

  An important role for such a group could be to advise the Bureau of Career Education on ways to improve the state's system of career education curriculum improvement efforts (i.e., with regard to both policies and operations). In this context, the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System would be considered as a major but not exclusive player within a statewide career education curriculum system.

- Formulate a set of specific guidelines for operation of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System Advisory Council.

- Take responsibility for formulating the programmatic goals and objectives for the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System rather than having its director do so. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System director should be required to develop a set of activities designed to achieve the Bureau of Career Education's programmatic goals and objectives for the Iowa

Curriculum Assistance System as well as plans for their implementation and assessment. At that point, the Bureau of Career Education can negotiate with the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System and the College of Education for a final set of activities that both parties believe to be relevant and capable of being accomplished in a timely and cost-effective manner.

- Define more specifically the place of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System in the statewide system of curriculum improvement initiatives including but not restricted to such areas as searches, product distribution, pre and inservice staff development, and being a clearinghouse of information about exemplary curriculum efforts.

- Address the issue of client dependency on the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System vs. using the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System as a means of capacitating clients to make the best use of career education curriculum technology and materials. The Iowa Curriculum Assistance System cannot do it all forever.

- Promote a policy of concentrating Iowa Curriculum Assistance System services to the most approachable clients (as opposed to trying to serve all potential client groups equally) as a near term strategy for making the best use of Iowa Curriculum Assistance System resources.

<u>Recommendations to the director of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System project:</u>

- Strive to increase the use of in-state partnerships to deliver services (e.g., Department of Education consultants, university staff, INFORM, CNIR) in order to maximize a ripple effect in the delivery of career education curriculum to clients.

- Make better use of out-of-state curriculum networks and resources of the Iowa State University.

- Expand current efforts to involve teacher education graduate students and new teachers in using the services of the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System. Consider informing and involving education students enrolled in other Iowa universities and colleges.

- Explore the feasibility of providing continuing education units for Iowa Curriculum Assistance System workshop attendance.

- Service the private sector indirectly by providing curriculum assistance to persons responsible for implementing community college economic development plans and efforts.

- Form and coordinate in-state networks of product users to assist them in local capacity building and in coordinating Iowa Curriculum Assistance System services.

- Look for new ways to communicate to clients what the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System has for them (e.g., a materials list, a sales catalog, a printed library catalog).

- Assemble Bureau of Career Education and university consultants to advice the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff on ways to improve efficiencies in cataloging, office operations, and marketing so as to improve services to clients and reduce the extent of labor intensive activities by the Iowa Curriculum Assistance System staff.